NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
NEWS ANALYSIS NO. 1-1684 OCTOBER 21, 1976
CHARLES MED

ELECTION '76: THE APATHY FACTOR

ANNCR:

MOST AMERICAN POLITICAL EXPERTS BELIEVE THAT AMERICAN VOTERS WILL NOT TURN OUT IN LARGE NUMBERS ON ELECTION DAY, A FACT THAT MAY WELL INFLUENCE THE FINAL OUTCOME. CHARLES MEDD LOOKS AT SOME OF THE REASONS FOR WHAT IS BEING CALLED "VOTER APATHY".

VOICE:

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN IS DOWN TO ITS FINAL WEEK AND A HALF, AND THE IMPRESSION ONE GETS FROM READING MOST AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS IS THAT THE SOONER IT ENDS THE BETTER. POLITICAL REPORTERS WHO HAVE BEEN COVERING THIS YEAR'S CAMPAIGN SINCE JANUARY ARE, WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, CALLING IT THE DULLEST IN MEMORY. DULL OR NOT, MANY VOTERS SEEM SO INDIFFERENT THAT PERHAPS MORE THAN HALF OF THE REGISTERED VOTERS WILL STAY HOME ON ELECTION DAY.

THE PRESS BLAMES MUCH OF THE INDIFFERENCE ON THE CANDIDATES. JIMMY CARTER IS CRITICIZED FOR WHAT SOME CALL HIS FREQUENT POSITION CHANGES AND FOR WHAT OTHERS SEE AS OVERLY VAGUE PROMISES. AND PRESIDENT FORD IS SAID TO BE RUNNING MORE LIKE THE CONGRESSMAN HE WAS FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS RATHER THAN A MAN SEEKING TO KEEP THE NATION'S HIGHEST OFFICE.

BUT THERE ARE THOSE IN AND OUT OF THE PRESS WHO SAY IT'S NOT THE CANDIDATES SO MUCH AS DEFECTS IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ARE SAID TO BE MUCH TOO LONG TO RETAIN VOTER INTEREST, NO MATTER WHO IS RUNNING. MOREOVER, THERE IS A GENERAL FEELING AMONG MANY VOTERS

THAT GOVERNMENT JUST DOESN'T WORK ANY LONGER, THAT NO MATTER WHO WINS WASHINGTON WILL PRODUCE MORE BLUNDERS, MORE SCANDALS AND MORE TAXES.

A MORE SOBER LOOK AT AMERICAN POLITICAL HISTORY SUGGESTS THERE IS NOTHING VERY NEW ABOUT CURRENT VOTER ATTITUDES, WHETHER IT'S CALLED DISTRUST OR APATHY. CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT AND THOSE WHO RUN IT IS A BASIC RIGHT THAT AMERICANS HAVE EXERCISED FOR TWO FULL CENTURIES. NONE OF OUR MORE RENOWNED POLITICIANS, FROM LINCOLN TO ROOSEVELT, WAS IMMUNE FROM CONTEMPORARY ATTACK.

IN ADDITION, CAMPAIGNS ARE TRADITIONALLY SHAPED AS MUCH IF NOT MORE BY ISSUES THAN BY THE CANDIDATES. BUT UNLIKE THE NINETEEN SIXTIES, WHEN THE NATION WAS SHARPLY DIVIDED FIRST BY RACIAL TENSIONS AND LATER THE VIETNAM WAR, THE CURRENT ISSUES ARE NOT SO CLEARLY DEFINED. WHILE MUCH OF THIS YEAR'S DISCUSSION HAS FOCUSED ON THE ECONOMY, THE ARGUMENT HAS FOLLOWED FAMILIAR PARTY-LINE POSITIONS, WITH THE DEMOCRATS PROMISING MORE GOVERNMENT STIMULUS, THE REPUBLICANS LESS, AND THE VOTERS UNSURE ABOUT EITHER REMEDY.

WHATEVER THE REASONS, THIS CAMPAIGN HAS INDEED CREATED LITTLE EXCITEMENT OR PASSION, LEAVING MANY TO WORRY ABOUT THE EXPECTED DECLINE IN VOTER PARTICIPATION. SOME POLITICAL OBSERVERS, HOWEVER, EQUATE THE ABSENSE OF PASSION WITH THE ABSENSE OF CRISIS, WHICH MEANS IN EFFECT THAT THE OVERALL SYSTEM IS PROBABLY WORKING. OTHERS POINT OUT THAT THERE IS NO DIRECT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOW MANY PEOPLE VOTE AND WHAT KIND OF GOVERNMENT THEY GET. THE SWISS, FOR EXAMPLE, VOTE IN SMALL NUMBERS BUT ARE WELL GOVERNED. IN COUNTRIES WITH COMMUNIST GOVERNMENTS, WHERE OFFICIAL -- OR SEMI-OFFICIAL --

PRESSURE IS APPLIED, VOTERS TURN OUT IN LARGE NUMBERS BUT FIND NO REAL CHOICE ON THEIR BALLOTS. AMERICANS HAVE A CHOICE, INCLUDING, FOR BETTER OR WORSE, THE CHOICE NOT TO VOTE.

MAH/PY